DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 585 HE 017 283

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TITLE Schools and Higher Education in a Period of Reform: Strengthening Standards and Performance.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the National Conference of the American Association for Higher Education (Chicago, IL, March 14-16, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Change Strategies; *College School Cooperation; *Educational Change; Faculty College Relationship; Higher Education; *Improvement Programs; Secondary Education; *Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

Ways to promote successful reform of colleges and schools in the 1980s are discussed. Attention is focused on issues pertaining to the curriculum, the teacher, and the student. Ways that colleges can contribute to reform of the schools are also addressed. It is claimed that many students have difficulty when they must use higher-order academic skills, such as analysis, application, and problem solving. There is increasing consensus across the county regarding the high school curriculum. As standards are raised and learning outcomes are better defined, educational tests should assume a new role. Improved learning by students also requires improved teaching. Positive actions that are needed include: improved working conditions and teacher salaries; positive incentives and recognition for teaching excellence; strengthened community support for teachers and schools; more opportunity for participative decisionmaking; and better teacher supervision and evaluation. Additionally, greater understanding of today's youths and higher expectations of students are a necessary part of educational reform. Teacher preparation and promoting transition from secondary to postsecondary education are examples of ways that higher education can help the schools. (SW)

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HE 017 283

Session 5
Thursday, March 15, 1984

SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN A PERIOD OF REFORM:

STRENGTHENING STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE

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This is a fascinating time for American education.

What we are seeing in all the reports, national conferences, magazine cover stories, and political positioning on educational reform is the shaping of public opinion. This is how the democratic process works. While it takes time for the public to focus attention and show readiness for change, it is this shaping process that eventually makes political action possible.

What makes the current educational reform movement different from others in the past is that, for the first time, it is focused at the state level. Governors and legislators have been energized on education. State leaders are acting on state reforms and -- in some cases -- are already appropriating state funds to carry them out. You can even sense a certain competition among the states as to which one will enact the most dramatic proposals.

Again, as in the past, changes in schools are being sparked by societal forces more than educational ones. In the 1950s, Sputnik, Soviet competition, and the onslaught of post-World War II babies fueled educational change. In the 1960s, civil rights and the War on Poverty were the dominant forces. The effects of Vietnam, alienation of authority and a quest for relevancy battered schools in the 1970s. During each of these decades, dramatic and controversial changes took place in American schools not as much for educational reasons as in response to what was happening in society at large.

It is important to see the current push for educational reform in this larger context. The driving force this time is economic insecurity at home and economic competition abroad. After all the reports are issued and the speeches given, educational change must address the economic concern underlying

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* Paper presented at the 1984 National Conference on Higher Education sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education on March 15, 1984. Permission to Quote restricted.

reform or once again we will experience disillusionment, backlash and retrenchment by the taxpayers who must support public education in America if it is to thrive.

At the heart of these economic concerns as they apply to education are the outcomes of teaching and learning -- the knowledge, skills and attitudes students should have mastered by the time they are graduated from high school. Improved academic achievement must be the basic goal if educational reform is to be successful in the public's eye.

What Makes An Effective School?

Many recommendations in the reports issued so far focus on structure rather than instruction. As actions begin to flow from the reports, we see indications that reform at the state level is being defined in terms of what can be legislated -- more homework, more time, more course requirements, more tests.

No matter how well motivated, this kind of quantitative approach by itself won't work today any more than it has in the past. We need to remind ourselves about what makes for an effective school:

- Clear priority for what must be learned
- High expectations for students and teachers -- striving standards, not just minimum ones
- Uninterrupted time on task
- Positive discipline, support for teachers and parental involvement
- Strong school-level leadership

These qualities can't be legislated. They can be achieved by community pressure, support, and leadership on a school-by-school basis. The success of educational reform won't hinge just on laws passed, funds raised, or reorganizations completed. It will depend on how much better our students learn. At the heart of educational reform in the 1980s, therefore, are the curriculum, the teacher and the student.

The Curriculum: A Growing Nationwide Consensus

Just as a budget reflects an institution's real priorities, so too a curriculum -- the one actually experienced by a student, not the one in a school catalog or state curriculum guide -- is what you believe your students should learn. The public is telling us that what our students are learning is -- plain and simple -- "Not good enough."

In responding, it is important that we make the right diagnosis about the curriculum. The issue no longer is "back to basics." The basics are back. The National Assessment of Educational Progress offers convincing evidence that there has been a clear upturn in student performance in reading and mathematics at the 9- and 13-year-old levels.[1]

What is true is that many students have difficulty when they must apply higher-order academic skills such as analysis, synthesis, application, inference, interpretation and problem solving. Students may be able to read a literary passage but they have trouble critically interpreting it. Students may correctly complete a mathematical computation but they are unable to apply it in solving a problem. Students may spell correctly and demonstrate a knowledge of grammar but they are unable to introduce and develop a point of view in writing.[2]

It also is true that the decline in academic performance appears to be most marked in our most able students. Hidden in the celebrated decline of SAT scores over 19 years is the fact that the most precipitous decline has been for those who rank highest in their high school class. Over the last eight years, for instance, combined verbal and math scores on the SAT dropped an average of 10 points overall; for those in the top tenth of their class, however, they dropped 26 points![3]

One of the most helpful aspects of the various national reports on school reform and new state policies on graduation standards is that they reveal a growing nationwide consensus on what is most important in the high school curriculum. Ernest Boyer refers to a core of common learnings with a central focus on writing. Theodore Sizer organizes his curriculum around inquiry and expression, mathematics and science, literature and the arts, philosophy and history. John Goodlad gives priority to the "five fingers" of human knowledge and organized experience -- mathematics and science, literature and language, society and social studies, the arts, the vocations. I find the College Board's Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do to be the most helpful translation of this consensus on curriculum because it defines it in terms of specific learning outcomes that were written by hundreds of practicing teachers from schools and higher education.[4] The key point is that there is increasing agreement across the country on what should be studied, for how long and for what purpose in the high school curriculum.

I believe this consensus, if translated into action, would address the current weaknesses in our curriculum. Were I still a principal, I would use these reports to examine with teachers the curriculum in our school. I would assess each course currently offered in terms of its contribution to these learning outcomes. And I would most likely reduce the number

of courses offered in the high school grades -- some high school course catalogs compete in size with those of universities -- and make certain that more time was devoted to fewer subjects studied in greater depth.

I then would scrutinize the textbooks available for these courses. In my judgment, textbook publishers and authors bear a heavy responsibility in the present period of reform. Their standards for textbooks have declined along with test scores. As Harvard Professor Jeanne Chall and others have documented, textbooks have accommodated to the decline in academic expectations in terms of their reading level and content.[5] This decline must be reversed.

In doing so, however, I would call attention to Ted Sizer's criticism that we "cover" too much, too blandly, in what is called a high school course. As textbooks have become more attractive to the eye, they have become duller to the intellect and heavier in detail. I commend to you Mortimer Adler's Paideia Proposal for some of its pedagogical ideas.[6] Textbook publishers and authors should heed his counsel and his brevity in developing a new generation of high school textbooks. While master teachers may create many of their own course materials from scratch, most classroom teachers depend very much on a textbook as the basis for classroom instruction. We can help teachers who want to do a better job of instruction by providing them with better textbooks and supplementary materials for their classrooms.

As standards are raised and learning outcomes are better defined, educational tests should take on a new role. It won't surprise you that I believe tests are good for some important purposes. But it may surprise you that I believe tests are not very useful for instruction. If the current reform movement is successful in establishing clearer standards and learning outcomes, as I believe it must be, then it will be possible to develop diagnostic tests that can better inform the student, teacher and parent about the progress of learning while it still is going on.

Most achievement tests available today are designed to measure what has been learned by the end of the instructional process. What is needed are tests that answer "How am I doing?" rather than just "How have I done?" Indeed, the theory and technology already are available not only to report progress but to identify learning barriers and to suggest ideas to the student and teacher for overcoming them. These kinds of diagnostic tests, however, depend upon a carefully defined curriculum. That task should reflect the judgment of those responsible for schools, not the testmakers.

The Teacher: Incentives for Growth

A stronger curriculum alone will not achieve the goal of reform. Improved learning by students requires improved teaching. It is ironic, but characteristic of American political behavior, that much of the public attention on schools focuses on scapegoating. It seems that public opinion cannot support change without first finding someone to blame. In this instance, the scapegoats too often are teachers.

I learned a long time ago that you don't get people -- children or adults -- to improve by telling them how bad they are. Constructive change generally comes about when enough people believe it is needed, is possible, and then set about doing it together. The kind of educational change needed to address the economic concerns that underlie this period of reform is instructional change. This can only happen in the classroom and must have the support of teachers if it is to occur.

The teachers who will be in the thousands of classrooms across America for the rest of this decade mainly are those already there, and they have been for some time. Even if we could overcome the law of supply and demand and attract the most talented to be our new teachers, there would still be few openings for them according to the enrollment projections and fiscal realities in most school districts. We must depend upon the existing cadre of teachers to achieve the instructional improvement expected by the public.

Teachers are frequently blamed for conditions they cannot control. What has been described in the reports on the current state of public education in America is more a criticism of where we are as a society and what our priorities (or lack of them) have been in communities, states and the nation at large. Schools are a pretty accurate reflection of the communities in which they are located. If we don't like the reflection, we have to look beyond the individual classroom to find its cause. While teachers cannot go entirely blameless, they also cannot fairly be saddled with responsibility for the condition of education in America today.

Some states and school districts, and some politicians, are approaching reform from a punitive direction primarily aimed at teachers. This is wrong and won't work. If today's teachers are so bad, we need to ask:

- Who trained them?
- Who graduated them?
- Who certified them?
- Who hired them?
- Who evaluated them?
- Who voted them tenure?
- Who supervises them?

If they really are so bad, then a lot of institutions and a lot of officials must share in the responsibility and blame. Such scapegoating, besides being wrong, is a waste of time and is self-defeating.

I believe that most teachers want to do a good job, that they entered their profession because they felt it was important, that they basically like working with young people and the subjects they teach, and that they would like to do better if given a chance and the support necessary to do so. If I am wrong, then all the reforms in the world will not improve instruction. If I am right, then we need positive actions that strengthen the dedication and resolve of teachers rather than punitive actions that undermine the professional commitment necessary for reform.

Foremost among the positive actions I believe are needed are these:

1. Improved working conditions and salaries for teachers. This is generally recognized and long overdue.

2. Positive incentives and recognition for teaching excellence such as the new Comprehensive Education Reform Act in Tennessee and the program of awards for teaching excellence in science and mathematics initiated this year by the GTE Corporation.

3. Strengthened community support for teachers and schools. A state commissioner of education recently accounted for high test performance in his state by describing the close identity that the towns feel with their schools and the support given teachers by the local citizenry.

4. More effective use of the considerable amount of funds already spent for in-service education by giving teachers the opportunity to shape and determine what these programs will be.

5. More opportunity for teachers to share in decision making at the school level. Such involvement promotes understanding and commitment in any organization but is all too rare in many schools.

6. Better supervision and evaluation of teaching performance on a regular basis both before and after tenure is granted. I personally believe that teachers should be involved significantly in the supervision and evaluation of their peers and that the credibility of such evaluation would be enhanced by this involvement.

7. New procedures to streamline the justified termination of incompetent educational personnel while still respecting basic due process. School officials and teachers' unions increasingly have a common interest in ridding the classroom of incompetent teachers. This subject, sensitive as it is, needs to be addressed by the teacher unions as well as by lawmakers and school officials.

These are the kinds of positive initiatives that can create the school climate necessary for instructional improvement to take place. Believing in practicing what I preach, Educational Testing Service recently took an unprecedented step. When a state and several school districts decided to use teacher tests as a sole and determining condition for continued employment or for determining salary advancement, even though direct evaluation of actual teaching competence in the classroom was possible, ETS and the NTE Policy Council announced that the NTE tests would not be provided to states or school districts for such purposes.

This is the first time any testing organization has placed such a condition on the use of its tests and services. The NTE Policy Council and I felt it was wrong to tell someone who has been judged a satisfactory teacher for 10 or 15 or 20 years that the passing of one test on one day is necessary to keep his or her job or salary. While recognizing fully the business implications of our decision, we felt an obligation to act assertively on this matter. When I urge positive rather than punitive actions towards teachers, I am doing so in a context of following my own advice.

The Student: A Key Element

A key element in achieving the goal of improved learning is the student. It is still a good rule of teaching that you should get to know the person you are trying to teach and understand where that person is before you attempt to impart new knowledge and skills. In the rush for reform, there is a tendency to forget that we are dealing with children and young adults. More homework, longer school days, longer school years, more courses required and similar "add-on" reforms may have their place, but they certainly have different impact on a seven year-old second grader than on a seventeen year-old senior in high school. It may be more important, as Sizer suggests, to actually teach less in order to do a better job involving the student in the learning process.

We need to approach educational reform with empathy for the young people who are the targets of this reform. The stress of unemployment, divorce, crime and hard times experienced by families in America also is a reality for the millions of young students in these families. Life is difficult already for young people today. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for teenagers and has increased by about 300 percent since the 1950s while rates for other age groups have not changed markedly. Today twenty-two percent of children under 18 years of age live in single-parent families and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly half the children born in 1980 will live in single-parent families before they turn 18. These same children can see the Armageddon of nuclear war portrayed on their television screens along with nightly reports of warfare, assassination and crime. Now the latest fad is music videos that bring themes of violence, sex and drugs into their living rooms to dance by.

Higher expectations of students are a necessary part of educational reform, but we must offer support to students at the same time as our expectations of them are being raised. We also must offer support to their parents if these changes are not to be just another burden on some already over-burdened lives. In our search for higher achievement, we need to address not only what happens in the classroom but where students can study, how they can get help when they need it, how community agencies can aid the schools, and how the parent and extended family can be enlisted to help their students.

Higher Education: Participant Rather Than Bystander

Up to this point, I have focused on the curriculum, teacher and student. What about higher education? How can colleges and universities be involved in an educational reform movement centered on the schools of the country?

The prime responsibility of higher education is to its own students. The opportunity for a meaningful college education, however, has been a powerful incentive for high school students and their parents over the years.

I would urge colleges and universities to critically examine the first two years of undergraduate education to assure that this opportunity indeed is as meaningful as possible. Why is it, for instance, that only four out of ten entering freshmen graduate four years later? How can some institutions justify large lecture classes and the paucity of senior professors teaching freshmen? One could argue that the present instructional organization for undergraduate education might be reversed, to make smaller classes and better instructors available to the least experienced students and to give juniors and seniors more opportunity to be on their own. To be a real incentive for high school students, we need to be sure that the undergraduate experience proves to be an opportunity they feel is worth striving for.

Four-year institutions may be able to learn from the best of the community colleges. Because of the great diversity of their students, community colleges have shown a lot of imagination in providing for the transition to higher education. Their learning centers, placement procedures, and counseling services set an example of instructional support for students that four-year institutions might well emulate.

A second way institutions of higher education might contribute to school reform is in the critical area of teacher preparation. Being in a period of reduced demand for new teachers, we have an opportunity to reform teacher education.

I would urge that Congress encourage this reform by establishing high-quality teacher preparation and in-service education as a matter of national concern and priority as it reauthorizes the Higher Education Act this year. I suggest that teacher training be restructured so that the primary focus of pre-service teacher education be an extended apprenticeship with high performance standards and very practical on-the-job instruction in how to organize a course, manage a classroom and involve students in their own learning. Supervising teachers responsible for this on-the-job learning should be selected for their mastery of teaching and be paid significantly for this added service.

The rest of what is presently teacher preparation -- philosophy, methods, human development, psychology -- should come as part of a master's degree program to be completed within five years of graduation and entry into the teaching profession. A beginning teacher is concerned with survival. Undergraduate teacher preparation should develop pedagogical skills basic to this survival. Having gained classroom experience, the teacher has a real-life context in which to more realistically consider methods of instruction, philosophical principles, and the effect of child development on learning.

This shift in what is taught before certification and soon after should lead to a program of continuing professional education for teachers. One of the most successful experiments of the 1970s was the so-called teacher center. I believe such centers have great potential for supporting the goal of educational reform on a continuing basis. They were professional centers in that teachers had the key role in determining their direction. They focused on very practical concerns of instruction on a day-to-day basis and were readily accessible to teachers. This combination --- from practicum to professional education to ongoing instructional problem solving --- provides a continuum of teacher development that is relevant to the primary goal of improving student achievement.

There are two other ways for institutions of higher education to help schools. Institutionally, colleges and universities should consider direct collaboration with a school or with a school district. I commend to you the university/school "pairings" in Boston, where 24 colleges and universities committed themselves to help that city's public schools in the midst of their stormy experience with desegregation. Eight years later, those institutions are still plugging away in a manner that is a credit to them and a great help to Boston's public schools.

I would urge faculty members in the audience to consider how you, as individuals, might help schools. You certainly have a role to play in educational reform as consultants, teacher educators, in-service trainers, and textbook authors. If this is not your area of expertise, then I urge you to consider what I believe to be the most important public service for anyone at the local level --- as an elected member of a board of education. It has been my experience that college professors inevitably are a strong force for good education when they are found on school boards. It is a demanding and frustrating responsibility, I know, but no role has greater potential for being a positive influence on education.

Excellence and Equality

This is indeed a fascinating time for American education. The potential for achieving change is great, in my judgment, but the window of opportunity is small. Public opinion and political responses have short lifespans. We need to make the most of this opportunity but we also need to be cautious.

The drive for excellence and higher standards can easily cause a setback in equality of educational opportunity. Each of the many reports asserts that we can and should have both quality and equality. The words sound good but we must recognize that they come when the drop-out rate in high schools is growing for the first time since World War II, and when enrollments in higher education indicate a reversal of the growth in college attendance by Blacks.

History will not judge us well if educational reform in the 1980s achieves its goal of improved achievement at the expense of the gains in equity earned so slowly and painfully over the past 20 years. We in education have a special duty to see that the dream of equality is not lost or compromised. This is fundamentally a decent nation in which opportunity for all must be part of true excellence. In this period of exciting change and ferment, we need to live up to that high standard too.

FOOTNOTES

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